

Rock Creek Ranger Station
End of Season Report
Erika Jostad
June 4-October 19, 2002

A. General Observations

Contacts **Hiker:** 2014
Stock: 327 (17% Private, 35% Administrative—Kern and Hockett Trail Crews, Chief Ranger/Department of Defense Trip, 48% Commercial—Cottonwood Pack Station, Rock Creek Pack Station, Mount Whitney Pack Trains, Three Corner Round, Bill Wyman).
Stock use nights: 535 (111 private, 232 Administrative, 192 Commercial).
Type of stock: 1 llama, 23 burros, 303 horses and mules.

B. Use Patterns

Hiker Foot traffic remains generally consistent with previous years encompassing a mix of traffic utilizing New Army and Cottonwood Passes, roughly half bound for Crabtree and Mt. Whitney and the remainder visiting Upper Rock Creek and the Miter Basin as a destination. There is a notable exception to established patterns. There seems to some increase in the number of hikers hiking up Mt. Whitney who enter and exit via Rock Creek in part because they are unable to obtain the requisite Mt. Whitney exit permit instituted by the Inyo National Forest this season. The majority of these hikers travel via the Pacific Crest Trail to Crabtree then up the Mt. Whitney Trail. Several parties attempted to circumvent the exit quota by using the Miter Basin as a base camp and climbing Mt. Whitney via Crabtree Pass and Discovery Pinnacle. This route is described in one of the new guidebooks on Mt. Whitney and has also been suggested by USFS permit accustomed to trail walking and resulted in several disappointed attempts. Additionally, it is counterproductive for permit issuers to recommend routes that will undermine the new exit quota.

I noted significant use on Mt. Langley this season. Second to the trail up Mt. Whitney, Mt. Langley is the most easily accessible 14,000' peak in California. The routes via New and Old Army Passes are roughly nine miles one way from the trailhead at Horseshoe Meadow. The route is mostly by trail and class one cross-country walking. I made a patrol to the summit in late August noting 489 climbers had successfully climbed to the peak thus far in the season with summit attempts made throughout the year. The summit register was placed in 2001 and likely was filled by the end of the 2002 season. The effect of the heavy use is evident in dozens of trails which braid the south and southwest slopes of the mountain and attendant significant erosion. Additionally, should the Mt. Langley

bighorn sheep herd persist, their habitat is surely disturbed by frequent travelers. There is a use trail which connects Upper Solider Lake to the Mt. Langley ridge in better condition than the maintained New Army Pass trail. There is a similar trail connecting the Army Passes with Mt. Langley. These trails braid out across the southern slopes of the mountain. I propose a more active management role may be appropriate to adequately protect the resource here. First, determine the status of the Mt. Langley sheep herd (John Weyhausen, Dave Graber?) and what impact the high use may have on breeding sheep. Second, address the myriad of trails and erosion by channeling visitors onto a single marked route such as was successfully done on the east side of Sawtooth Pass in 2001. Third, rehabilitate the numerous areas damaged by erosion. The second and third items could be carried out by a Restoration Crew.

Stock Numbers of stock parties visiting the Rock Creek area were slightly higher than in previous few years. Important differences this season include the concentration of grazing in Lower Rock Creek and the number of private parties using the area for the first time. Private parties utilized seven separate camps this season due to lack of familiarity of the area. Two of the camps are routinely used by stock parties, three are routinely used by backpackers in the vicinity of the food storage locker, two were previously unused. Rarely were there more than two stock parties in the area at once necessitating the existence of seven stock camps. This transpired primarily because stock camps in the area are not designated and first time users were unaware of traditionally used camps. Impacts were significant in some sites with tent pads used as hitch line areas, trees girdled by rope when stock were tied directly to trees for extended periods, seven seeps were trampled to mud 8' across by stock accessing camps in areas. I propose setting up a demonstration stock camp at Lower Rock Creek Crossing which would be signed and provided with features which would serve as a model for minimum impact stock camping. See appendix A.

Administrative Administrative use in Rock Creek included a five day stay of the Kern trail maintenance crew, a retreat for the Sequoia District ranger and all sub district rangers, and the annual Chief Ranger/Department of Defense trip. The latter has been a good opportunity to show high level administrators in the Departments of Interior and Defense the resources we are protecting. An extensive party of NPS and independent scientific researchers came through Rock Creek this season looking at species composition in meadows, insect populations in grazed and non-grazed meadows, tree ring data for fire and climate history, wetland ecology, and wilderness management issues.

Aircraft Military aircraft continue to feature prominently in the wilderness experience of Sequoia-Kings Canyon. Dozens of fighter jets traverse the park backcountry daily. Genuine "low flying" aircraft (3000' AGL) have become uncommon due largely to relationships fostered between NPS staff and relevant military personnel. Unfortunately the number of aircraft overflying the

wilderness appears to be steady if not increasing and persists in overwhelming the sounds of nature.

Commercial Users The primary commercial users of the Rock Creek area are the pack stations which operate under incidental business permits (IBP). The Cottonwood Pack Station which is in the area several times each week has shifted its use to primarily spot trips and pass through to Crabtree on overnight trips. The pack station issues wilderness permits directly to clients and does not always provide accurate information, particularly concerning appropriate food storage. This problem has been ongoing over many years. It was again addressed this year in the field and also in dialogue between the pack station and the Kern sub district ranger. Additionally, specific incidents were documented for the NPS concession office. The Cottonwood Pack Station has been largely responsive to concerns raised in the field regarding camp conditions. However, the food storage issue persists. I recommend meeting with area rangers and sub district rangers at the beginning of the 2003 season to discuss expectations. Also, the Cottonwood Pack Station should no longer be given the privilege of issuing permits for the USFS because they have shown they are unwilling to provide accurate food storage information to clients which jeopardizes visitors and wildlife. Several IBP pack stations which use the northern parts of Sequoia-Kings Canyon and the Inyo National Forest were under court order this season limiting their amount of stock use night in the area. When this limit was met by the Rock Creek Pack Station in early autumn they began bringing stock south and beginning trips into Rock Creek and Crabtree via Cottonwood Pass in the Golden Trout Wilderness and not covered by the court order. This meant heavier than previous late season use in the Rock Creek drainage and will need to be monitored.

Other IBP users include REI, Adventure 16 and Exodus Tours all run regular trips during the summer bound for Mt. Whitney. Exodus Tours had various trip leaders with mixed results. They come to Rock Creek every two weeks with stock support and camp at Penned Up meadow for four nights before moving on to Crabtree via Crabtree Pass. Because they come with a large group and spend several days in the area the impacts can be significant. This season the final group through left ten pounds of garbage in their camp including food scraps, glass and tin cans and similar garbage was found in their camp

Hunting Activity

C. Natural Resources

Wildlife

Vegetation

D. Cultural Resources

Archaeological Sites I visited archaeological sites on Siberian Outpost, along Rock Creek, Sheep Camp on Tyndall Creek, Bullfrog Lake and Chagoopa Plateau. All sites appear unmolested and matching description in archaeological resources reports. The exception being Bullfrog Lake that was surveyed during the 2001 field season by an NPS archaeology crew, fewer artifacts are now present at this site. I met with a member of the NPS archaeology crew that was surveying this season in the Kern Canyon and Tyndall area who reported that removal of artifacts from the field for analysis again took place this year. As a law enforcement officer I am charged with enforcement of the Archaeological Resources Protection Act and was sent to a weeklong course by the Park in 1998 to enhance my abilities to do so. It seems that the NPS is largely responsible for removing artifacts from the field for research purposes. I am unaware of artifacts subsequently being returned to these high elevation, wilderness sites. Archaeological research is beyond my area of expertise yet I question how many artifacts need be removed from the field for analysis and why they are not returned once that analysis is completed.

Historic Structures Rock Creek Ranger Station (53 years old) remains in good condition. Caulking was undertaken to prevent rodent entry. This was successful in the main cabin. Rodents continue to access the cold storage closet on the porch as it is only mortared between to logs on the outside. Further caulking will be done in 2003.

E. Backcountry Facilities

Patrol Cabin See Historic Structures. The outhouse is in good condition. The solar electric system was put into conduit this season and the solar panels were mounted on a post. This facilitated tracking the panels and provided ample recharge of the storage batteries. The three storage batteries were replaced at the beginning of the season after six years of use. The new batteries functioned well and were left fully charged.

Drift Fence The only drift fence in Rock Creek is in poor condition and stock have been able to circumvent it. The poor condition of this fence has been reported by Rock Creek Rangers since it was installed in 1988. It was constructed by volunteer labor in half a day. It has been improved upon by our own skilled labor in the intervening years but is essentially of poor design. The fence wires are nailed directly to trees and a couple "gaps" have allowed stock to penetrate the fence. This fence has been deemed valuable by our Plant Ecologist in protecting Rock Creek Meadow #2 from which significant species composition data is gathered. This fence should be entirely reengineered by the trail crew if it is to be effective.

Signs The signs in the patrol area are in good condition. We need to sign temporary meadow closures for the benefit of private stock users who are not typically familiar with specific meadows when using an area (even when they do

have a meadow guide some users do not know precisely where they are). If closures continue at Rock Creek Lake and Stringer I propose attendant signing. Signs will also figure as important features of a demonstration stock camp in Lower Rock Creek (see Demonstration Stock Camp Proposal). I would like to get one of the wooden signs for the ranger station which have been made from sequoia wood for most of the other stations in the past couple years. The station itself is currently unsigned.

F. Trails

Trail Crew activities and work accomplished The Kern trail crew spent less than one week camped in Lower Rock Creek as they were rushed to move on the Kern bridge-rebuilding project. They came in early August rather than late September. They conducted regular maintenance cleaning water bars and bucking the couple trees that had come down in the winter. They cut wood rounds for the ranger station and put in a few checks on the trail between Lower Rock Creek and Guyot Pass. During their time camped in the drainage the crew had a bear in camp nightly. No food was obtained by the bear due to the use of bear proof panniers active hazing by the crew. The Kern crew left clean camps at Lower Rock Creek, Sandy Meadow and on the Chief Ranger/Department of Defense trip.

Problem Areas The steepest grades in the patrol area are the top half of the south side of Guyot Pass and the lower part of New Army Pass. Both suffer from erosion and are impacted from stock use (Guyot Pass far more so). A stock party had a minor accident near the top of Guyot Pass this season due to steepness. This stretch of trail is a perpetual visitor comment as it is incongruous with the rest of the Pacific Crest Trail through the park. It is in need of a reroute/addition of switchbacks. In order of priority for work needed:

1—Guyot Pass

2—New Army Pass

3—“Unmaintained” trail to Pinned Up Meadow

We need to address #3. This is not classified as a maintained trail and to my knowledge was never formally constructed. However, this trail is used frequently and is significantly eroded. With each new fallen tree a new path is created and passing pack boxes repeatedly damages trailside trees.

G. Camp Areas

Conditions

Sanitation

Firerings

Firewood availability

Food Storage

Impacts

H. Permit System

Trailhead and Issuing Office

I. Inventory

- 3 small and 1 large propane tanks (none needed for 2003)
- Full supply of medical equipment (BP cuff and stethoscope with hiking gear at Ash Mt.
- Radio battery charger
- 1 liter alcohol fuel
- 1 gallon white gas
- small and large plastic and burlap sacks enough to last 2003 season
- 3 rolls duct tape
- 2 rolls strapping tape
- 1 6x9 spiral bound note pad

J. Needs for next season

Station

- 2 tubes gray color "mortar caulk"

Equipment

- Thermarest pad needs repair or replacement. The pad delaminated forming a bubble on the top and bottom. This seems to be a manufacturing defect and should be returned to Cascade Design for repair or replacement. It is a full-length ultralight pad. Pad left in Kern cache at Ash Mt on stack of pads to left of cache door, green in color.
- 3 ¾" webbing buckles male end for backpack
- Replacement of buckle on lid/convertible fanny pack of green Dana Design terraplane backpack. The buckle is sewn into the lid and will require replacement by the manufacturer. Without this buckle the lid is no longer usable as a fanny pack on multi-day patrols.

K. Recommendations